

## SECTION I

### CLASSIC VIRTUES CONSIDERED



Choosing a journal theme is one of the most stimulating aspects of *Reflective Practice* Editorial Board meetings. You will discover on pages 48, 82, and more, of this volume that we are now projecting themes three years in advance to give authors sufficient time to develop an essay around a theme that intrigues them. “Virtues in Formation and Supervision,” as the theme for this volume, was not chosen lightly. Virtues seem like an outdated category. There is also a fear of promoting impossible ideals or moralistic behavior. For me, those worries have been replaced by a more complex understanding of virtues. The rich discussion in the articles that follow around the theme has deepened my conviction that character matters in ministry and fostering virtues is central to formation and pastoral supervision.

*One assumption underlying this focus on virtues is that the formation of authentic character is as important as role definition for religious leaders in the 21st century.* What is needed from religious leaders today in an increasingly secular context is more than knowledge or effective strategies or marketing skills or even increased professionalism. Important as these may be, what is needed in this context is the formation of religious leaders who will be courageous enough and durable enough to work together in the world as partners and neighbors without domination and without certitude. What John Chrysostom wrote in the 4th Century about ministers possessing a “robust and exceedingly vigorous character” is no less important today. Ministers are compelled to do more and more with less and less in half the time. The disciplines served by this journal have worked hard to foster religious leaders with professionalism and increased competence. Without losing this emphasis on competence that has strengthened the work of ministry, you are invited to consider the necessity of virtues in forming women and men to be religious leaders whose “robust character” is marked by authenticity as well as competence.

*Character is generally understood to be the predisposition to act in accord with one’s principles and values.* In that sense, character is morally significant. Character is the complex set of mental and ethical traits that mark an individual. Following Aristotle and modern virtue theories, this emphasis on character presumes that good works arise from good people. The minister’s work does not just follow from a moral code or a set of theological principles

or even well-developed competencies and skills but from habit, out of an ingrained, inculcated pattern of living. Ministerial character is both habitual and deliberate. The psychologist Viktor Frankl once described the therapeutic process in a way that corresponds to the formation of character. What therapy has to achieve is to “transfer an *unconscious potentia* into a conscious *actus*, but only in order to re-establish an unconscious *habitus*.<sup>1</sup> The content of a ministerial *habitus* will include virtues.

As you will rediscover from reading the reflections on compassion, the rediscovery of character and resurgence of virtues do not belong to any particular religious tradition.

*A virtue is a disposition or character trait that is well enough established in its possessor so that it guides action.* In this sense, a virtue may be both a gift and an achievement. A virtue is also universal and contextual. The dispositions may be universal but the cultivation of a virtue is particular. Because each age addresses the spiritual dimensions life in unique ways, some of the virtues in this section are traditional and others, like imagination, may not be found on standard lists of virtues.. Later in this volume, Gordon Hilsman reviews a significant text by Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman that has quickly become a standard resource for anyone interested in exploring the significance of virtues for life and ministry.<sup>2</sup> I commend the review and the book to you. It is a welcome move away from the focus on pathologies that has dominated psychology toward the interior strengths that allow people to meet the challenges of life effectively and recover from setbacks gracefully.

#### FOUNDATIONAL VIRTUES

We certainly will not solve the debate about the number of virtues or which virtue is the most important. Cicero (149–106 BCE) chose gratitude; Maya Angelou and C. S. Lewis selected courage; Kong Fu Zi proposed humility as the foundation of all virtues; and Erik Erikson said it was hope. Martin Marty proposes in the first article in this section that trust is *the* virtue for the practice of ministry. You might be persuaded by the reflections in the Interfaith and Intercultural Symposium in this section that compassion is the fundamental human virtue. From the perspective of Christian theology, I have long felt that the fundamental disposition of the soul is gratitude and the essay by Robert Emmons on gratitude as the ‘queen of virtues’ further solidified my conviction.

There has been a movement in philosophical and theological circles to promote wisdom as the ‘foundational virtue’ necessary to counter the instrumental appeal of technology. In a recent book entitled *Wisdom: From Philosophy to Neuroscience*, Stephen S. Hall suggests an origin of wisdom that should delight everyone engaged in ministerial formation and supervision. *Wisdom, Hall says, requires an experienced-based knowledge of the world.* It includes knowing what to keep and what to discard in each particular situation, when to follow the rules and when the rules no longer apply, how to identify and manage contradictions, and how to mediate between emotion and reason, between self-interest and broader social concerns. These words from Hall could be a mantra for pastoral supervision:

Thinking about wisdom almost inevitably inspires you to think about yourself and your relationship to the larger world. With diligence (and luck), it might even make you think about how both can be made better.<sup>3</sup>

Wisdom eludes easy definition but we know it when we see it. We just don’t see wisdom too often. Wisdom “is rooted in character, personal history, and the experience of human nature, yet it is bigger than any one individual.”<sup>4</sup> While Hall is clear that how one becomes wise remains a mystery, he explores the cognitive and emotional components of wisdom around what he calls the “eight neural pillars of wisdom” two of which are included in this section. You will find his exploration of the neurobiological dimension of virtues accessible and balanced.

We begin with Martin E. Marty’s essay in which he presumes that trust is *the* virtue for ministry. Trust is “a gift and not entirely a human achievement.” Marty’s shift to trustworthiness is evocative because it makes trust a part of the unconscious *habitus*. The effectiveness of religious leadership in the future will depend on re-establishing trustworthiness as a dependable virtue. James and Evelyn Whitehead conclude their essay with these words: “When imagination becomes a virtuous resource in our spiritual life we are able to piece together the disparate events of our past into a plot with direction and purpose. Through the prism of inspired imagination deserts and exiles are refashioned into graceful way stations on a miraculous journey.” Although imagination is not included in most classifications of the virtues, it is the human capacity that enables us to live toward the mysteries we cannot see.

In my home of origin, pride was the chief sin or vice. Lisa Fullam’s delightful essay on humility helped me put to rest *again* old admonitions that ultimately promoted a false humility. What I found most intriguing was

Fullam's discussion of 'magnanimity' as the companion virtue to humility. Magnanimity "is the devoted and resolute cultivation of our own excellence." And the discovery of our own excellence is enhanced, I would suggest, by gratitude. Robert A. Emmons is widely regarded for this research on gratitude as a human strength. We will not be surprised to read that the virtue of gratitude does not come easily. Even so, it is foundational to well-being and mental health throughout one's life span. "*Gratitude must, and can, be cultivated,*" Emmons claims. If that is so, and I am inclined to agree, what might it mean to regard the cultivation of gratitude as central to ministerial formation and supervision? The collection of reflections on compassion from different religious and cultural perspectives is a rich tapestry that reminds us once again why we minister and work to form ministers.

Herbert Anderson  
Editor

#### NOTES

1. Viktor E. Frankl and James M. Dubois, *On the Theory and Therapy of Mental Disorders: An Introduction to Logotherapy and Existential Analysis*, James M. Dubois, trans. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 213.
2. Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
3. Stephen S. Hall, *Wisdom: From Philosophy to Neuroscience* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 18.
4. *Ibid.*, 23.